

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Classroom Applications of Academic English

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**Topic:** Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners

**Practice:** Develop Academic English

### Highlights (short version)

- Definition of academic English
- Why academic English is important
- How academic English is different from oral conversation
- Components of academic English, including phonology, grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse
- Teacher support and professional development

### Highlights (extended version)

- Definition of academic English and why it is important
- Distinction between conversational proficiency and academic English and an example
- Components of academic English, including phonology, grammar, sociolinguistics, discourse
- Classroom activities for teaching academic English: discussing and writing based on texts, instruction in precise use of words and grammar, scaffolded oral language activities, dictations, and cloze activities
- Importance of corrective feedback in learning academic English
- District roles: ensuring there is a significant amount of time for teaching academic English, providing professional development in academic English tied to the curriculum, and providing a way for teachers to monitor student progress in developing academic English

### About the Interviewee

Dr. Robin Scarcella is director of the ESL program and lecturer of the ESL program/linguistics department of the University of California, Irvine. She has written over 20 articles on ESL teaching and L2 acquisition, edited three volumes, and written one book. Her articles have appeared in such journals as the *TESOL Quarterly*, *Language Learning*, *Brain and Language*, and *Second Language Research*. She has been an invited lecturer at over 20 universities and institutes, including the Center for Applied Linguistics, the Foreign Language Institute, Stanford University, and the University of Hawaii.

She received her doctoral degree in linguistics at the University of Southern California and her masters in second language acquisition-education from Stanford University.

### Full Transcript (short version)

Academic English is the language of school. It's the language of print English. It's the language that children need to know in order to be successful in the United States in their schooling. When students don't have instruction in academic English, they don't learn it, and as a result, they don't have access to the same opportunities that the students have who do know academic English. They may not be able to go on to higher education. They may not be able to go to college or the university. They may not be able to get the occupation that they want.

Oftentimes children come to school with oral English skills, and they're able to convince their teachers that they have acquired good school English even when they haven't. We've been fooled by this. Young children have been able to read the gist of their books without really understanding the language features in these books and being able to critically read them and understand them.

Students who are at an intermediate level of English proficiency, just like beginning language learners, need a lot of instruction in academic language. If they are not given this instruction, their language may stabilize. They may be able to understand the gist of their readings, without really understanding them very well. They may be able to convey themselves in oral language without conveying themselves accurately and with precision. They may be able to write, but not write correctly. And as a result of not receiving any English language instruction that furthers academic language, their language development may cease to develop all together.

And this is why it is so critically important for teachers not to be fooled by English language learners who, yes, can engage in an oral conversation, but not with accuracy, and not with precision.

Academic English is composed of many different components. One of them is the phonological component. When children use academic English, they have to be able to speak the words correctly. They have to know the sounds of the language and the intonation of the sentences. For example, they have to know that you say Ma-NIP-u-late, but ma-nip-u-LA-tion. AC-quire. Ac-qui-SI-tion. They have to know where to place sentence stress. And so if they've neverheard the word stress, then they don't know where to place it.

If children have never heard the word stress, they may have difficulty using words correctly. So, one component of academic English consists of the phonological components, and this is the component that helps students know how to speak the language correctly, with the correct pronunciation, and also know how to write the language, knowing spelling.

In addition to the phonological component, an important part of academic English is the grammatical component, which helps students know how to string sentences together correctly, knowing that you start with a subject, usually, and a predicate, and that subjects and verbs agree, knowing what verb tense to use, knowing that you use modals in academic English such as can, may, will, must, might, shall, should, instead of with one modal auxiliary “can,” as is usually used in oral, informal English.

In addition to the grammatical component of the English language, academic English also entails a sociolinguistic component, knowing different genres of the language—knowing how to explain, how to describe something, how to summarize something, how to argue in favor or against an important issue. Those are all components of academic English.

Academic English also includes a discourse component, which helps students know how to start a conversation and keep it going and how to end the conversation. In writing, this component includes how to organize an essay with a beginning, a body, and a conclusion.

As you can tell, academic English entails all four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. And the most challenging of all are reading and writing.

If we are really going to be serious about helping our teachers teach academic English successfully, then teachers are going to require a lot of instructional support themselves. They are going to need to have the best teacher professional development available that helps them to teach academic English, and I would suggest that this teacher professional development be tied to the specific curriculum that they are teaching.

### Full Transcript (extended version):

My name is Robin Scarcella. I’m a professor at the University of California, Irvine. I also direct the program in academic English and English as a second language.

Academic English in the language of school. It’s the language of print English. It’s a language that children need to know in order to be successful in the United States in their schooling. When students don’t have instruction in academic English, they don’t learn it.

And as a result, they don’t have access to the same opportunities that those students have who do know academic English. They may not be able to go on to higher education. They may not be able to go to college or the university. They may not be able to get the occupation that they want.

Oftentimes children come to school with oral English skills, and they're able to convince their teachers that they've acquired good school English even when they haven't. We've been fooled by this. Young children have been able to read the gist of their books without really understanding the language features in these books and being able to critically read them and understand them.

Students who are at an intermediate level of English proficiency, just like beginning language learners, need a lot of instruction in academic language. If they're not given this instruction, their language may stabilize. They may be able to understand the gist of their readings without really understanding them very well. They may be able to convey themselves in oral language without conveying themselves accurately and with precision. They may be able to write but not write correctly. And as a result of not receiving any English language instruction that furthers academic language, their language development may cease to develop all together. And this is why it's so critically important for teachers not to be fooled by English language learners who, yes, can engage in an oral conversation, but not with accuracy and not with precision.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by academic English in contrast to everyday informal English. Imagine a child has been asked to explain "what is a rain forest?" And the child says, "rain forest, lots of trees, wet." That answer is correct, and we know what the child means. But the child is not using academic English. Imagine that the child says instead that "a rain forest is a forest or an area in which there are many trees all depending on precipitation for their growth." That sentence would be representative of academic language. You can see the difference. In one case, the child does not use a complete sentence. In the other case, the child does use a complete sentence. Moreover, the child uses academic language such as "depends on," "growth," "precipitation."

Academic English is composed of many different components. One of them is the phonological component. When children use academic English, they have to be able to speak the words correctly. They have to know the sounds of the language and the intonation of the sentences. For example, they have to know that you say Ma-NIP-u-late, but ma-nip-u-LA-tion. AC-quire. Ac-qui-SI-tion. They have to know where to place sentence stress. And so if they've never heard the word stress, then they don't know where to place it. If children have never heard the word stress, they may have difficulty using words correctly. So one component of academic English consists of the phonological component. And this is the component that helps students know how to speak the language correctly with the correct pronunciation and also know how to write the language, knowing spelling.

In addition to the phonological component, an important part of academic English is the grammatical component, which helps students know how to string sentences together correctly: knowing that you start with a subject usually and a predicate, and that subjects and verbs agree; knowing what verb tense to use; knowing that you use modals in academic English such as can, will, may, must, might, shall, should, instead of just one modal auxiliary, can, as is usually used in oral, informal English.

In addition to the grammatical component of the English language, academic English also entails sociolinguistic components, knowing different genres of the language, knowing how to explain or how to describe something, how to summarize something, how to argue in favor or against an important issue. Those are all components of academic English.

Academic English also includes a discourse component, which helps students know how to start a conversation and keep it going and how to end the conversation. In writing, this component includes how to organize an essay with a beginning, a body, and a conclusion.

As you can tell, academic English entails all four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The most challenging of all are reading and writing.

When I go into a classroom and I see teachers teaching academic English, I see them engaged in a variety of different activities. One particularly useful activity for teaching academic English is summarization. The children are summarizing a text in their own words, using academic English. By summarizing the text, what you see the students doing is appropriating the language of the text into their language. Any time I see children engaged in conversations around text, using that text in their conversation, talking about the text, appropriating the words and the grammatical structures from the text in their conversations, I know that academic English instruction is taking place.

When I see teachers directly teaching students how to use words precisely and accurately, not just teaching word meanings, but also teaching students how to use those words appropriately in a sentence to convey meaning accurately, then I know that academic English instruction is taking place.

When I see teachers teaching grammar using student-friendly explanations and getting students to use these explanations to improve their writing, then I know that academic language instruction is taking place.

An important part of academic language instruction is what I call language awareness—making students aware of the language they're using and the way they're using it. Teachers who read a short passage to students and have the students focus on very specific language features are increasing the students' awareness of the use of these language features. When teachers take the next step and get the students to use the features of language in their text, in their writing, then I know that academic language instruction is going on.

Scaffolded oral language activities are excellent for building academic English. In these types of activities, students are given sentence strips, for example, and asked to use these sentence strips to communicate with a partner. So for instance, a student may receive the sentence strips that, say, in comparison to da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, and then be asked to compare maybe two movies, two short stories, using the expression in comparison to da, da, da. These sentence strips encourage the students to use specific features of the language in particular ways. These then become appropriated, and the students then learn these language features. That kind of scaffolding helps language learners.

A different type of scaffolding entails giving students lists of vocabulary words to use in their conversations. And sometimes these vocabulary words even come with examples so students can look at the words, for instance, "discriminate against," and then talk about how someone discriminates against somebody else, instead of discriminate on, in, or under somebody else. So they force English language learners to use English in a precise way.

But there are other wonderful types of activities. Dictations are really good for English language learners. In addition, oral cloze activities in which students hear a passage of text read to them, and then they fill in the blanks. That can be very helpful because it forces students to pay attention to words, to word endings that are so critical in academic English.

A critical part of academic language instruction is instructional feedback. I had a student once who used the word “firstable” in her essay. She used the word “firstable,” she used the word “secondable,” and she used the word “thirdable.” I pointed to the word “firstable,” and I asked her if she saw anything wrong with that. She said oh no, nothing, nothing wrong with it at all. I had to get her to use the dictionary to find that the word “firstable” just didn’t exist in the English language. I had to explain to her that the appropriate expression was the expression “first of all.” Nobody had ever provided her with any corrective feedback. Corrective feedback is important in learning academic English. It doesn’t mean that it has to be punitive. It means that it has to be instructional, supportive, highly focused on what it is students are learning in the classroom.

So for teaching English language learners at the very beginning levels, the teacher will not be giving a lot of instructional feedback. At this point and time the teacher is just encouraging the student to use language. But once the child has acquired enough language to convey himself meaningfully, that’s when the teacher is going to be providing instructional feedback.

In addition, districts need to make sure that they give students sufficient instruction in academic language—so that it’s not just a mere 15 minutes a day, but a significant amount of time, a block of time devoted to the instruction of academic language. And it would be fine with me if the districts would replace their ELD oral instruction with the instruction of academic English instead.

Finally, it’s really important that districts establish a way of monitoring the development of academic language, and providing teachers and students with feedback concerning their development of academic language so that they can meet the needs of those students who are beginning to fall behind in terms of academic language development.

All teachers need to teach academic language. All teachers. The problem is not all teachers are qualified to teach academic language. We have had three generations of teachers who haven’t had grammar instruction, for instance. And many of our teachers today don’t know the difference between a subject and a verb. So that makes it very difficult for them to teach, for instance, subject-verb agreement, an important part of knowing academic language. Teachers need expertise in learning how to teach academic English, and they need to develop it themselves. It’s something we all need to be working on. The textbooks need to support the instruction of academic English to help teachers teach it better.

If we’re really going to be serious about helping our teachers teach academic English successfully, then teachers are going to require a lot of instructional support themselves. They are going to need to have the best teacher professional development available that helps them to teach academic English. And I would suggest that this teacher professional development be tied to the specific curriculum that they’re teaching.

In addition to this, they need to know that those key areas of language that tend to stabilize over time if not supported in the classroom. They need not to be overwhelmed by the instruction of academic English, but to know that the focus of their instruction should be gradual improvement over time.